In Search of the Volksgeist in Argentina and Ireland

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Both Argentina and Ireland are part of the "West," a somewhat vague region defined by a Greco-Roman heritage, Indo-European languages (with exceptions, of course), a largely Judeo-Christian religious tradition, the influence of the Enlightenment, industrialization, capitalism, colonialism, and certain cultural movements that included Romanticism and modernism. Many of the common references hence come from a common source. Perhaps the first useful framework for discussing both countries is Atlantic history, and especially the notion of the Atlantic world, which came into being after 1492. The expansion of European powers helped to shape this Atlantic world united by colonial conquest, the triangular trade, migration and capitalism (see Moya 2007 and Thornton 2012). The first large population movements out of Ireland were to continental Europe between 1600 and 1750, of people fleeing English conquest and dispossession. The conquest of Ireland was in good part motivated by English-Spanish rivalries that were fought out in the Atlantic world, and English adventurers, merchants and soldiers were active in the Americas and in Ireland: for example, Sir Walter Raleigh, involved in the colonization of both, is remembered among Irish-speaking children in West Kerry as the bogeyman Róilí, from his part in the massacre of several hundred Spanish soldiers at Dún an Óir at Smerwick Harbour in 1580. The North American colony of Virginia was founded in 1607 and the Irish town of Virginia in 1612, both projects of English colonization honouring Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen. If the exodus of Irish and the massive colonization by English and Scots (notably the Plantation of Ulster, from 1609) were among the salient characteristics of Irish demography in this period, Ireland resembled the Americas as a place that offered great opportunities to colonists, with land opened up to settlement, confiscated from its native owners in Ireland as it was from the indigenous inhabitants in the Americas. Unlike British North America, where this led to a politically important class of free farmers, in Ireland as in Latin America, ownership of the land came to be largely monopolized by a class of large estate owners. In Ireland, however, religion was a major motivating factor for English conquest and colonization, and led to the Protestant settlers having a virtual monopoly of power and land ownership, in contrast to the existing Catholic population -few of whom converted to Protestantism -and who were excluded from political and public life.

The Spanish who settled in Argentina and the English who settled in Ireland inevitably developed a sense of difference from the metropolis. This was a natural consequence of the colonial experience, of metropolitan condescension towards them, of resentment at trading restrictions and of the arbitrary imposition of metropolitan power. The creole experience – that of the descendants of settlers from the metropolis in the colony – was shared by the makers of modern Argentina and Ireland, and this creole nationalism, as Benedict Anderson calls it, pioneered modern nationalism (Anderson, 1991, pp. 47-65). The creole was defined both by the anterior – the Indians in the Americas, the native Irish in Ireland – and by the posterior – metropolitan *arrivistes* in both countries and, in Argentina, the mass of immigrants that from the late 19th century threatened the social and cultural order already consolidated and who came to

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greatly outnumber the creoles. The creole experience, the North American revolution and the French revolution were key strands in the development of Argentinian independence and of Irish republicanism.

Criollo is a complex term in Latin American Spanish; the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as "creole," a historical term referring to a person "of European descent born in a Spanish American colony," but in Argentina it has the additional connotation of being from the countryside and of Spanish, as opposed to recent immigrant – "*gringo*" - origin. If we can transpose the term "creole" to Ireland, historically the country had not just one, but two creole populations. The English and Welsh Normans and their multi-ethnic camp followers (remembered in such Irish family names as Walsh, Irish *Breatnach*, and Fleming, Irish *Pléimeann*) who conquered much of Ireland in the 12th century formed a new population group, called *Gall* in Irish, which identified culturally and politically with England. The native Gaelic Irish (Irish *Gael*) and the "English," as they called themselves, maintained their distinctiveness from each other until the Reformation and later. We find, for example, in the seminaries established from 1592 on the European continent (beginning that year with the college in Salamanca) to train Irish priests - when English conquest precluded the formation of priests in Ireland - a competition at times between the Gaelic Irish and the "Old English," the Franciscans particularly drawn from the Gaelic Irish, the Jesuits from the Old English (so named to distinguish them from the "New" English colonists, who were Protestant). In a shared adversity and drawing on a common Catholicism, both population groups merged in the 17th century upheavals in a new Irish national identity based on adherence to Catholicism and in opposition to the new Protestant English settlers. This is when the Irish word *Éireannach*, a native of *Éire* or Ireland, comes to be used to transcend the previous ethnic categories of *Gael* and *Gall*.

Argentina is like most countries of the Americas in the sense that it was inhabited for millennia and conquered by Europeans who exploited its resources, decimated its population and imported African slaves. For much of its colonial history it was a peripheral part of the Spanish realms, attached to the Viceroyalty of Peru, centered in Lima, through which all trade with Spain had to pass. A major reason for the establishment of the new Viceroyalty in the Río de la Plata, with its capital in Buenos Aires, was that the old trading routes through the Caribbean had come under British control. The new viceroyalty, founded in 1776, was to be short-lived. It did not become a single independent republic after independence, but rather gave rise to separate Argentinian, Uruguayan and Paraguayan states. The triangular trade - based on the sending of European manufactures to Africa, African slaves to America and American raw materials to Europe - connected the Atlantic world until the early 19th century. Irish salted beef and butter helped to feed the British navy and the inhabitants of the British sugar plantations in the West Indies. Irish merchants and soldiers were active participants in this Atlantic system, under British, French and Spanish flags. Liberalism, as José Moya points out, created an important political dimension to the development of the Atlantic world, facilitating the growth of transatlantic commerce through free trade, making the huge volume of migration possible through a political commitment to freedom of movement, and influencing independence movements in the Americas (Moya, 2007, p. 182). The industrial revolution led to an international division of labour and huge demand for American raw materials: hides for machine belts and tallow for soap and lubricants from the Río de la Plata region early in the 19th century, cotton from the Southern states of the USA, wool after mid-century from Argentina which by the 1880s had the largest sheep flock in the world (one of the main reasons for the Irish immigration), rubber from the Amazon, timber from Canada, and linseed from the pampas of Argentina and the prairies of the US and Canada. Consumer demand with growing industrialization in Europe brought sugar from Cuba, coffee from Brazil, and beef and mutton from Argentina and Uruguay, the USA and Canada (Moya, 2007). The industrial

revolution encouraged major innovations in transportation, especially steamship and trains, revolutionizing the movement of people and of materials.

Immigration transformed Argentina and in a short period made a greater demographic impact than in any other country in the world. If in Ireland, of those born in the country more than 40% were living abroad at the turn of the century, in 1914 almost 30% of the Argentinian population was foreign-born. Emigration for millions was a future-oriented choice, to youthful countries that offered boundless possibilities, of a decent job, of owning land, of social advancement. It was a movement to the periphery, but to a periphery full of promise. Demographic decline and economic stagnation characterized Ireland at the same time that Argentina was experiencing rapid demographic and economic growth. By the beginning of the 20th century, the rapidly growing Argentinian population and the rapidly diminishing Irish population had converged: some four and a half million in each country. Argentina became one of the richest and most advanced countries in the world. By 1914 per capita income was on a par with that of Germany and the Low Countries and higher than in Spain, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland, and was tenth highest in the world. The great majority of Buenos Aires' working class was composed of immigrants. Overall in 1914 Argentina had a high-wage, high-consumption economy, dependent on free trade, though manufacturing was poorly developed and the country was very slow to industrialize. As the historian David Rock points out, "[t]he elites were closely linked with the export of farm goods, and the high living standards of the new urban population rested on the inflow of cheap imports and continuing commercial reciprocity with western Europe" (Rock, 1985, p. 183). British economic power was already evident immediately after independence. By 1890 a third of British investment in Latin America was in Argentina, where it constituted by far the largest foreign investment, and most of the thousands of miles of railroad were in British hands. By 1914 Argentina was one of the key exporters of primary goods to the industrial economies, mostly to Western Europe.

Ireland's relationship with Britain in some ways resembles Argentina's: peripheralized in terms of the Atlantic economy through being relegated to the position of provider of raw materials. Both countries developed a strong national identity partly in opposition to the British threat; the repulsion of the British invaders of Buenos Aires in the early 19th century by the creoles played a large role in helping the latter assert themselves against Spain. In both countries anglophobia has mirrored strong anglophile tendencies. Irredentism in both countries – the Malvinas for Argentina, Northern Ireland (the "Six Counties") for the Irish state – has been a key aspect of 20th century political life. Nationalism in both countries has taken characteristically populist forms, the Partido Justicialista of Perón in Argentina, Sinn Féin and especially De Valera's Fianna Fáil in Ireland. Both countries have suffered from endemic political violence in the 20th century (and more recently each has dealt with the post-conflict situation in original ways). Argentina's vertiginous demographic growth in the 19th century has been the mirror image of Ireland's precipitous demographic decline. Economic instability has characterized Argentina at a time when Ireland was characterized by economic stagnation until the dubious convergence of economic collapse in both countries in the first decade of this century.

Of course, Argentina was in many ways very different from most of the other countries of Latin America with its wealth, its large sophisticated middle class and literate population, but as a new country, it lacked the glittering cultural heritage that made Europe and especially France so attractive to local intellectuals. France had an important role in legitimizing cultural products. In Argentina, tango was tainted for a long time by its low-life origins, but its embrace by the *beau monde* of Paris allowed it to be reclaimed at home. Borges was first translated in Paris, the capital of the literary world. Despite British dominance of the economy, cultural life and cultural taste remained very francophile. If Argentina represented the future for millions of emigrants, it was also a capitalist periphery. The contradiction is the basis for what Beatriz Sarlo has called Buenos

Aires' "peripheral modernity" (Sarlo, 1988). Roberto Schwarz has written that "[w]e Brazilians and other Latin Americans constantly experience the artificial, inauthentic and imitative nature of our cultural life" (Schwarz, 1992, p. 1). Cultural cringe has been central to modern Ireland's cultural and indeed political life; the hope expressed in Thomas Davis's famous song from the 1840s, "... that Ireland long a province be a nation once again"[1] or Douglas Hyde's call in 1892 for "The Necessity for De-Anglicizing Ireland" (Hyde, 1986) are evidence enough of that. Of Borges, Beatriz Sarlo writes that his work always deals with the exploration "of how great literature can be written in a culturally marginal nation," a key question, as she puts it, "for a relatively young nation, without strong cultural traditions" (Sarlo, 1993, p. 3).

The creation of a national culture was a key project in both countries, and cultural nationalism, involving what Joep Leerssen has called "a form of internalized exoticism" (1996, p. 67), played an important role. The literary scholar Pascale Casanova sees the development of national movements in the 19th century "as a symbolic assertion of equality between the various national collectivities" on the cultural, political and economic level. But, she argues, the older European powers had a great advantage. The artistic heritage of nations – their cultural capital - was accumulated over long historical periods, visible in medieval cathedrals, castles and palaces, and in great canonical works of art: "[t]ime still conferred strength, and antiquity, authority" (Casanova, 2011, p. 125). This was apparent in a long established state such as France where even a political rupture as momentous as the French Revolution did not break the continuity of an old and venerable high culture. For new countries, the lack of a national artistic and literary heritage accumulated from the past that could give authority to artistic creation in the present was keenly felt. The novel and positive ideas of vernacular culture, deriving from Herder in the late 18th century and amplified by Romanticism in the 19th, provided a new resource for creating a modern national culture. According to Casanova,

> By granting each country and each people the right to an existence and a dignity equal in principle to those of others, in the name of "popular traditions" from which sprang a country's entire cultural and historical development, and by locating the source of artistic fertility in the "soul" of peoples, Herder shattered all the hierarchies, all the assumptions that until then had unchallengeably constituted literary "nobility" – and this for a very long time (2004, pp. 76-77).

Contra writers on European nationalism such as Ernest Gellner (1996), Miroslav Hroch argues that most European national movements long predated industrial society, with antecedents for modern nation-building in late medieval and early modern times, often in aborted earlier efforts. These left resources for a later period, in the form of relics of an earlier political autonomy, in the memory of former independence or statehood and in the survival of the medieval written language (Hroch, 1996). Ireland has the oldest vernacular literature in Western Europe, and one might well see this as an obvious resource for asserting national continuity and for modern nation-building. But historical ruptures, however, made the accumulation of such cultural capital especially difficult in the Irish case: "[t]here is scarcely another country in Western Europe where a high culture was sustained in the Middle Ages in which less of the treasures of learning have survived," according to the historian Donnchadh Ó Corráin, and he refers to both ecclesiastical and secular buildings, libraries, manuscripts and works of art (Ó Corráin, 2004, p. 7). The 16th and 17th century Elizabethan and Cromwellian conquests led to the destruction and dispersal of the documents and monuments of high culture, to the dispossession and exile of the native elites and, in the latter century, demographic disaster. From the second half of the 18th century onwards, a language shift gained pace throughout the country: perhaps half the population still spoke Irish

[1] "A Nation Once Again" is still well known in Ireland and is regularly performed publicly.

around 1800, a proportion falling to about a seventh by 1900, mostly country people in the poorest parts of the country who were illiterate in their native language and often in English too.

In Argentina, the literary depiction of the gaucho in so-called *gauchesco* poetry in the last decades of the 19th and first decades of the 20th centuries asserted a national ideal, different both to the marginalized indigenes and to the immigrant masses, and can be compared with the work of the literary revival in Ireland, which reclaimed the vanishing and despised Gaelic world for the nation: both were, in certain ways, conservative responses to a modernization that seemed to be crushing each country's distinctiveness. Two works treating of the world of the gaucho enjoyed astounding popularity: *Martín Fierro*, by José Hernández, which was published in 1872 had already seen eleven edition by 1879, and *Juan Moreira*, by Eduardo Gutiérrez, published in 1879 enjoyed an even greater popularity in print (Blache, 1991-92, p. 73). The *gauchesco* poets, however, as Borges pointed out in 1951 in "The Argentine Writer and Tradition", deliberately cultivated a popular style, but were not gaucho poets: "*gauchesco* poetry," he insisted, "is as artificial as any other literary genre" (Borges, 1999, p. 421). But these poets nevertheless tried to find an authentically national idiom, and we can see a similar ambition in the work of an Irish writer like John Millington Synge, whose synthetic Hiberno-English as found most memorably in his best-known play, *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), leads easily to parody, but issues from the same quandary: how to write an Irish literature in English. Yeats, as we know, tackled the issue through taking inspiration both from medieval Irish literature - known to some extent to the English-speaking intelligentsia through scholarly editions and translations from the middle of the 19th century - and to the contemporary folk tradition, in which he was deeply interested, publishing two anthologies of folklore. Other Irish intellectuals went further and maintained that only through the medium of the Irish language, marginalized and long despised, could an authentic Irish voice express itself. From this came the language revival movement, centered on the Gaelic League, which had a revolutionary impact on Irish nationalism.

Oscar Chamosa (2010, p. 3) argues that in Argentina interest in folklore derived from different intellectual currents: cultural nationalists from the early 1900s moving away from a liberal-cosmopolitan model of the country; regional elites such as the Tucumán sugar mill owners who "promoted folklore research in their region as a way of defending their economic and political interests at the national level"; and media producers and musicians, who popularized regional folk music. He argues that the folk culture of *criollos*, and especially of *criollos* from the North West, was projected as being an authentic national culture – the *criollos* descended from the colonial population rather than from recent immigrants and were often partly of indigenous descent. The introduction of *criollo* music and dance to the school syllabus in the 1920s and 1930s was seen as a way to bridge the divide between the cosmopolitan city and the countryside and help to Argentinize the children of European immigrants. In 1922 the Tucumán-born intellectual Ricardo Rojas, later rector of the University of Buenos Aires, wrote:

> Folklore defines the persistence of the national spirit, showing how, despite progress and external changes, there is in the life of nations an intrahistoric substance that persists. This intrahistoric substance is that which must be saved, so that a people may always be able to recognize itself (Blache, 1991-92, p. 75).

In 1921 the Consejo Nacional de Educación carried out a National Folklore Survey (*Encuesta de Magisterio*), circulating to thousands of teachers throughout the country a questionnaire with questions on custom and belief, on stories and proverbs, on art and on traditional knowledge. In the directions sent to the teachers, emphasis was placed on the patriotic nature of the work, but the teachers were also instructed not to record "any element that appears exotic on our soil as would be, for example, contemporary poetry and songs born among foreign peoples and recently

transplanted to the Republic through the influx of immigration" (Blache, 1991-92, p. 75; see also Chamosa, 2010, pp. 47-63 and Farberman, 2010, pp. 87-131). This was not to be the last folklore survey carried out by schoolteachers. The Consejo Nacional de Educación carried out another in 1939, and in 1951 the ministry of education of the Province of Buenos Aires carried out its own. Martha Blache points out a continuity in the instructions, with stress on "love of country, safeguarding of Argentinian nationality, protection of the traditional patrimony deriving from the Spanish and indigenous heritage, as a neutralizing potential against the influence of the immigrant" (Blache, 1991-92, p. 79).

Douglas Hyde, a member of the Anglo-Irish Protestant elite, was the key link between the artistic use of the oral tradition and scholarly study of it in Ireland and between the literary movements in English ("the Irish Literary Revival") and in Irish ("the Gaelic Revival"). He helped to set the agenda for cultural nationalism within which folk culture, and especially Gaelic folk culture, would have an important place. *Beside the Fire: A Collection of Irish Gaelic Folk Stories* (1890) and *Love Songs of Connacht* (1893), both of them bilingual folklore collections, had a very great impact, more for Hyde's literal translations from the Irish than for the original language. His 1892 lecture on "The Necessity of de-Anglicizing Ireland" was informed by the idea that unless Ireland rediscovered its *Volksgeist*, it would be incapable of any worthwhile artistic production (Hyde, 1986). The Gaelic League was founded in 1893 with the aim of reviving Irish as a spoken and as a literary language and Hyde was elected president. Irish was practically moribund as a literary language by that time and the initial debate was whether the admired language of the most important 17th century writers should be the basis for a new literary standard (since subsequent writing and notably that of the 18th century poets showed a marked dialect influence thus breaking with the earlier common literary language). In the end the proponents of the spoken language won out. At a time when few were literate in Irish and the language was in a precarious position, it made no sense to create a divide between the literary and the spoken languages. The spoken language too offered the possibility of a ready-made literature through the textualization of oral traditions. Hence the Gaelic League published volumes of folklore that helped to fill the gap for reading materials and also provided a model for prose fiction in Irish (see O'Leary 1994). Competitions and prizes for storytelling, singing, dance, and for collections of folklore were held (Ó Súilleabháin, 1984). The League struck a blow for the legitimacy of the Irish language, until then associated largely with an oppressed, impoverished, illiterate - and declining - minority. It was an important part of the struggle for the widening of political and cultural citizenship in Ireland. In the Irish Free State, after the turbulent years of the Easter Rising, the War of Independence, partition and the Civil War, several members of the League met in 1927 and founded the Folklore of Ireland Society with the aim of collecting, publishing and preserving the folklore of Ireland. The Society and its journal *Béaloideas*, incidentally, would hardly have been possible without the financial assistance of Patrick McManus (Pádraig Mac Mághnuis) and other members of the Irish community in Argentina (Briody, 2007, p. 78). The collection of folklore was institutionalized under the auspices of the Department of Education with the founding of the Irish Folklore Institute in 1930, which was succeeded by the Irish Folklore Commission in 1935. Its task was to record, catalogue and publish Irish folklore, its remit covering all of Ireland, and it used a number of full-time field-workers ("collectors") for that purpose. Their work was supplemented by the voluntary contributions eventually of thousands of others, including in 1937-38 senior pupils from primary schools in a scheme carried out with the co-operation of the Department of Education and the Irish National Teachers Organization. By the time the IFC was replaced by a university department of folklore in University College Dublin in 1971, the archives had at least two million pages, plus some twenty-five thousand photographs and thousands of hours of sound recordings, among the largest such collections in the world.

The key individual involved in the project of recording the folklore of Ireland was Séamus Ó Duilearga (James Hamilton Delargy), a protégé of Hyde's and director of the Irish Folklore Institute and the Irish Folklore Commission as well as editor of its journal. For him the existence of Irish folklore represented the persistence of a national culture. The culture that belonged to the humble Irish-speakers of the West coast once belonged to the whole nation. He explained that after the destruction of the native elite in the 16th and 17th centuries the common people saved "in spite of all persecution some of the culture of the upper classes and admitted it into their age-old treasury of oral tradition." Thus "a large part of our medieval literature exists in oral form..." He and his colleagues considered themselves for that reason "not as creators or adapters, but as literary executors of earlier generations" (Ó Duilearga ,1943, pp. 21-23, 30, 36).

According to Herder, each people possessed its own cultural authenticity, its own *Volksgeist*. Folklore was commonly appealed to by cultural nationalists both to showcase a cultural phenomenon that in certain respects was unique to their country but also as a weapon in domestic culture wars. Folklore, associated above all with peasants, was supposedly rooted in the nation's soil as were the peasants themselves, and could be contrasted with the inauthenticity of cosmopolitan cultural influences – aristocratic, immigrant or indeed proletarian – and at the same time could be extolled as the true culture of the people, "the sum total of the instrumental and subaltern classes of every form of society that has so far existed," as Antonio Gramsci defines them (Gramsci, 1985, p. 189). As such folklore could appeal both to populism on the left and on the right. If today there is a substantial literature on the concept of folklore and of its ideological uses, there is a new appreciation of its value as "intangible cultural heritage," not just a national but a global patrimony, and closely related to questions both of cultural and of biological diversity (since the preservation of biological diversity depends on the maintenance of different worldviews and of the rejection of a *pensée unique*). Both Argentina and Ireland are signatories to the 2003 UNESCO Convention on the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage – Argentina signing in 2006, Ireland at the end of 2015. Each party to the Convention is eligible to nominate certain of its traditional ("intangible") cultural practices to the Representative Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In 2009 tango was added to the lists, in 2015 *filete*, the Buenos Aires painting technique, and *chamamé*, the music genre from the North East, is being nominated for 2018. Because of Ireland's late signing of the convention, nominations are on-going for *uilleann* piping (using the Irish bagpipe) for 2017 and for hurling for 2018 (the game for which Buenos Aires Hurling Club was originally founded in 1922) (www.ich.unesco.org). If this new appreciation of traditional culture is far removed from any notion of the *Volksgeist*, the notion of intangible cultural heritage is not without its own essentialisms. But that a discussion for another day.

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